WHAT DO WE MAKE OF THE NIGHTTIME STARS? SOME THOUGHTS ON CONSERVATIVE JEWISH SPIRITUALITY.

By Rabbi Dan Ornstein

Stars and other features of the night sky possess tremendous power to awaken in us what our teacher Rabbi Abraham Heschel called radical amazement, that wondrous sense beyond words of being in the presence of endless greatness. People often write about stars and the night sky poetically, in the quest to articulate a deeper wisdom we feel when we look up into the heavens at night. Two poems from vastly different times and places emphasize how widespread this human impulse is. The first poem, *Stars*, by Robert Frost, was written by him early in his career, and published in his first poetry collection, A Boy’s Will, in 1913.

*How countlessly they congregate  
O'er our tumultuous snow,  
Which flows in shapes as tall as trees  
When wintry winds do blow!--  
  
As if with keenness for our fate,  
Our faltering few steps on  
To white rest, and a place of rest  
Invisible at dawn,--  
  
And yet with neither love nor hate,  
Those stars like some snow-white  
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes  
Without the gift of sight.*

Frost sets the scene vividly for us: we feel as if we are with him, standing outside on a cold, clear winter night after a snowfall, craning our necks to embrace the breath-taking sight of uncountable numbers of stars. Yet that scene is quickly replaced by a brooding, earth bound meditation about the fragility and mortality that await us all. Rather than feel enlivened and excited by the bright winter night sky, Frost imagines those “faltering few steps” that our feet take over the snowy ground as well as through life. Those very steps are “keen for our fate,” they know that they will bring us ultimately to our graves –“a place of rest” that, like the stars themselves, are “invisible at dawn”. What about those majestic stars gazing upon this earthly scene? Like the snow-white marble eyes of a statue of the Roman goddess, Minerva, they are beautiful but blind, stony, detached, and impassive. Possessing “neither love nor hate”, they “look down” upon the world coldly, unable to see, to intervene in, and to feel empathy for human suffering. Frost’s use of the image of Minerva in the last quatrain of the poem is quite significant. The ancient Romans identified her as the goddess of wisdom. (She was the Roman “version” of the Greek goddess, Athena.) The poet seems to belittle the idea of divine wisdom: unlike even the steps of our own feet, God (or “the gods”) utterly lacks consciousness of, and investment in, the human condition. Frost makes this clear in his notes to his first poetic collection, where he writes that *Stars* is about how “There is no oversight of human affairs.” His alternating sense of wonder and terror at the universe and its spiritual emptiness emerges from the simple act of looking upwards at the night sky. Searching for comfort in its stars that are like God’s eyes, Frost concludes that no One “up there” is watching us with engagement and compassion. Like the “tumultuous snow”, we are blown about by the winds of life, and we are truly alone.

The second poem, known in Hebrew as *Maariv Aravim* (literally, “God causes the dusk to be dusk”) is perhaps more familiar to us. Like its parallel, *Yotzer Or,* in *Shacharit* (morning worship), *Maariv Aravim* is a *Maariv* (evening worship) prayer praising God’s creative power as manifested in nature. It is the first *brakhah* recited prior to the chanting of the Shma. This prayer-poem, whose author is unknown, is quite ancient. The *Mishnah* (Tractate *Brakhot* 1:4) refers to it obliquely as the “long *brakhah*” (one that begins and ends with all or part of the *Barukh Attah Adonai* formula) that is the first to be read in the evening before the *Shma*. The *Mishnah* was edited by Rabbi Judah the Prince in the 3rd century CE, and he drew upon even more ancient oral traditions. The translation below is taken partly from the second edition of *Siddur Sim Shalom* for Shabbat and festival, with some modifications by me. I have written it out in poetic lines:

*Praised are You Adonai our God, Who rules the universe:*

*Whose word brings the evening dusk. Who opens with wisdom the gates of dawn, Designs the day with wondrous skill, Sets the succession of seasons, And arranges the stars in the sky According to His will.*

*Adonai Tzevaot is His name:*

*God creates day and night, Rolling light away from darkness And darkness away from light. God causes the day to pass by And brings on the night, Distinguishing between day and night.*

*May the Eternal God rule over us forever. Praised are You Adonai Who brings on the evening dusk.*

Unlike Frost’s *Stars*, this prayer-poem is filled with divine wisdom, engaged, active divine participation in the world, and (by extension), plenty of oversight of human affairs. *Maariv Aravim* forms a triad with the two *brakhot* that come after it, all three of which encompass the biblical words of the *Shma*. This triad emphasizes the three ways in which, according to Judaism, we experience God’s presence in the world: through creation, through revelation of the Torah, and through God’s historical redemption of the Jewish people. Note the rich use of metaphors that evoke images from the original creation story found in Genesis. God’s word brings on the evening, God opens the gates of the heavens, designs the days, rolls away light from darkness and darkness from light, orders the stars in their celestial courses, and sets the seasonal patterns. All of this God does with wisdom and with wondrous skill as the Lord of Hosts. We might assume that everything in the night sky is the result of a singular creative divine act; since that original moment of the world’s birth, the world has run on its own energy, blindly and without purpose. Not so, asserts the poet who wrote *Maariv Aravim*. Whether read in Hebrew or in English, the prayer-poem’s verbs are all in the present tense, to assert forcefully that the work of creation is *now* and is *God’s*. Further, our supposedly distant royal Creator is addressed twice in the intimate second person.

It should come as no surprise that Conservative Jewish faith and spirituality stand firmly in the camp of *Maariv Aravim*. However, we Conservative Jews also recognize that people’s relationships with God are often dialectical, reflecting the ebbs and flows of our lives, emotions, and experiences. At times we feel like the author of *Maariv Aravim*: God is a living, compassionate presence to us. At other times, we may sense the utter absence of God that Robert Frost speaks of, as we deal with suffering and loss. Each spiritual posture struggles with the other, at times forging a new synthesis in the quest for God. Conservative Jewish spirituality and theology are part of a long, complex chain of Jewish religious tradition. Though despairing atheism has never been part of our religious language, great biblical, rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical writers have always made room for the idea and personal experience of *hastarat panim*, the hiding of God’s face. An authentic Conservative Jewish approach to God begins with both postures of faith/closeness and doubt/alienation because both are authentic expressions of the human spiritual quest. Further, allowing both to be part of our religious conversation keeps open the lines of communication between all Jews, whatever our beliefs, as well as between all human beings. Ours is a world where a growing number of religious literalists *and* atheists are becoming increasingly, dangerously intolerant, whether of faiths that are deemed unacceptable or of faith in general. We Conservative Jews have a vital, critical role to play in this regard. We can help others “look up at the stars” and sense with radical amazement God’s magnificent presence, while constantly reminding humanity that God “looks down from the heavens” with love for every person, regardless of his or her faith and beliefs.

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